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TAGS: SDI, PARM

SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO WASHINGTON POST ARTICLE ABOUT  
OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT REPORT ON SDI

1. UNCLASSIFIED ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUESTED: RECENT WASHINGTON POST ARTICLE ABOUT CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT (OTA) REPORT ON SDI CONTAINED A NUMBER OF INACCURACIES. THIS CABLE TRANSMITS FOR EMBASSY USE/INFO TEXT OF RECENT JOINT SDI-OTA LETTER PUBLISHED ON MAY 5 REFUTING THE WASHINGTON POST ARTICLE. WE WILL TRANSMIT MORE DETAILED GUIDANCE ON THE OTA REPORT WHEN IT IS PUBLISHED. ACTION REQUESTED: ACTION ADDRESSEES SHOULD PROVIDE TEXT OF LETTER TO HOST GOVERNMENTS. INFORMATION ADDRESSEES MAY PROVIDE THE DOCUMENTS TO HOST GOVERNMENTS AS APPROPRIATE, IF THERE IS SUFFICIENT LOCAL INTEREST AND PRESS COVERAGE OF THE OTA REPORT AND SDI. END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUESTED.

3. ON APRIL 24, 1988, THE WASHINGTON POST PUBLISHED AN

ARTICLE BY STAFF WRITER JEFF SMITH PURPORTING TO DESCRIBE A RECENT OTA REPORT ABOUT SDI. THE OTA REPORT, "SDI: TECHNOLOGY, SURVIVABILITY AND SOFTWARE," HAS NOT BEEN PUBLISHED ALTHOUGH AN UNCLASSIFIED VERSION IS BEING PREPARED FOR RELEASE IN THE NEAR FUTURE. THE POST ARTICLE DEPICTED THE OTA REPORT AS BEING EXTREMELY CRITICAL OF SDI. AS INDICATED IN THE LETTER BELOW, THE OTA REPORT ACTUALLY TREATS SDI IN A MUCH MORE BALANCED WAY THAN SMITH DEPICTED. THE JOINT ABRAHAMSON-GIBBONS LETTER TO THE POST ON THE MATTER MAKES CLEAR THAT SMITH DID NOT DO JUSTICE TO EITHER THE OTA REPORT OR SDI.

4. BEGIN TEXT OF ABRAHAMSON-GIBBONS LETTER:

MAY 2, 1988

MR. BENJAMIN C. BRADLEE

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EXECUTIVE EDITOR  
THE WASHINGTON POST  
1150 15TH ST. N.W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20071

AS THE DIRECTORS OF THE US CONGRESS' OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT (OTA) AND THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT'S STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE ORGANIZATION (SDIO), WE TAKE SERIOUS ISSUE WITH THE APRIL 24 WASHINGTON POST STORY ON THE NEW OTA STUDY OF THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE.

THE POST STORY OFFERED AN INACCURATE AND INCOMPLETE PICTURE OF THE OTA FINDINGS. THE OTA STUDY EXAMINES VERY COMPLEX ISSUES IN CONSIDERABLE DETAIL; ANY EFFORT TO DISTILL ITS CONTENTS INTO A FEW NEWSPAPER COLUMN INCHES WOULD HAVE TO RESULT IN OVERSIMPLIFICATIONS WHICH, WHILE REGRETTABLE, ARE UNDERSTANDABLE. HOWEVER, IN WRITING ABOUT THE OTA REPORT BEFORE IT IS PUBLICLY AVAILABLE, THE POST DENIED ITS READERS THE ABILITY TO JUDGE INDEPENDENTLY THE ACCURACY OR FAIRNESS OF ITS PRESENTATION.

THE POST STORY FAILED TO REPORT IMPORTANT AREAS OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN SDIO AND OTA, AND MISREPRESENTED SOME AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT. THE HEADLINE AND FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THE POST STORY OFFER A PARTICULARLY TELLING EXAMPLE OF SUCH MISREPRESENTATION. SDIO AND OTA DISAGREE ON THE FEASIBILITY OF RELIABLE, TRUSTWORTHY SOFTWARE FOR A FUTURE DEFENSE AGAINST BALLISTIC MISSILES. SDIO BELIEVES THAT SUCH SOFTWARE CAN BE DEVELOPED; OTA IS MUCH MORE SKEPTICAL, AND CONTENDS THAT THERE WOULD BE A "SIGNIFICANT PROBABILITY" OF "CATASTROPHIC FAILURE" OF A BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM RESULTING FROM A SOFTWARE ERROR. NOWHERE IN ITS STUDY, HOWEVER, DOES OTA CONCLUDE -- AS ALLEGED BY THE POST -- THAT SUCH A FAILURE WOULD BE "LIKELY". AS ANY STATISTICIAN KNOWS, AND AS THE OTA REPORT MAKES CLEAR, "SIGNIFICANT PROBABILITY" DOES NOT EQUATE TO "LIKELIHOOD".

TECHNICAL EXPERTS CAN AND WILL DIFFER ON HOW RAPIDLY WE CAN GENERATE AND REFINE THE TECHNOLOGIES NEEDED FOR EFFECTIVE DEFENSES AGAINST BALLISTIC MISSILES. SDIO FINDS MANY OF OTA'S CONCLUSIONS IN THIS REGARD TO BE UNDULY PESSIMISTIC, WHEREAS OTA CONSIDERS SDIO TO BE EXCESSIVELY OPTIMISTIC. BOTH OUR ORGANIZATIONS, HOWEVER, ARE FIRMLY COMMITTED TO INFORMED, CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION OF STRATEGIC DEFENSE ISSUES. WE REGRET THE MISLEADING CHARACTERIZATION OF OUR POSITIONS IN THE APRIL 24 POST STORY, AND LOOK FORWARD TO A FULLER, MORE ACCURATE, AND MORE PRODUCTIVE AIRING OF THESE ISSUES WHEN THE OTA REPORT IS PUBLISHED.

SINCERELY,

JAMES A. ABRAHAMSON  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, USAF  
DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC DEFENSE  
INITIATIVE ORGANIZATION

JOHN H. GIBBONS  
DIRECTOR  
OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT  
UNITED STATES CONGRESS

END TEXT OF ABRAHAMSON-GIBBONS LETTER.

5. MOSCOW MINIMIZED CONSIDERED. SHULTZ  
END OF MESSAGE UNCLASSIFIED

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